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PROPHETS AND POLITICIANS: MARSILIO FICINO, SAVONAROLA AND THE VALORI FAMILY*

This article addresses the political context of a troubled Renaissance moment in the reception of classical philosophy and Christian teaching. From Late Antiquity onwards, there was a long-standing debate about the relationship between these two ways of thinking about the world and the proper end of humankind within it. At one extreme were critics of pagan literature arguing that in a Christian world its moral lessons were pernicious, and at the other were intellectuals and theologians, such as Augustine, who saw fundamental continuities between Platonic and Neoplatonic philosophies and Christian revelation. Italian humanists, for obvious reasons, could not but directly confront this question.¹ While some humanists, such as Coluccio Salutati, remained ambivalent about the value of pagan writings for Christians, a broader trend of increasingly sustained and sophisticated articulations of the Christian relevance of classical philosophy emerged in Italian humanism, beginning with Petrarch and culminating in the most influential Florentine Neoplatonist of the fifteenth century, Marsilio Ficino.²

The end of the fifteenth century and much of the sixteenth witnessed a major breakdown in the apparent harmony of Christianity and classical philosophy. The conflict began in earnest with the spectacular and sudden rise to power in Florence of the millenarian Dominican friar Girolamo Savonarola in 1494. At well-attended and much discussed public sermons, Savonarola thundered from the pulpit against Plato and other ancient writers;

*Thanks to Ed Muir, Chris Celenza and Donald Weinstein for helpful criticism of earlier drafts of this article. Thanks are also due to the Mellon Foundation and to Yale University's Whitney Humanities Center for the time and resources to prepare the article for publication.

¹See the discussion of this question in Ronald G. Witt, *'In the Footsteps of the Ancients': The Origins of Humanism from Lovato to Bruni* (Leiden, 2002), 157–61, 245–6, 252–5, 334–7.

²See the discussion of Ficino's reconciliation of Plato and Christian doctrine in James Hankins, *Plato in the Italian Renaissance*, 2 vols. (Leiden, 1990), i, pt 4, ch. 4.

at best, he proclaimed, they were irrelevant and at worst positively dangerous. Savonarola's ascent in Florence coincided with the French invasion of Italy and the transformation of the peninsula into a major theatre of destructive and vicious wars. The combination of these dramatic and terrifying events called into serious doubt the confident and optimistic claims of the earlier generation of humanists; as Jacob Burckhardt put it, 'humanist culture melted away in the furnace which [Savonarola] lighted'.³ Although in the sixteenth century the Christian value of Platonism continued, particularly as articulated by Francesco Diacceto and Girolamo Seripando, the spread of the Protestant Reformation hardened intellectual battle lines in ways that made impossible the ecumenical initiatives of the fifteenth century. In the seventeenth century, the great Counter-Reformation theologian Roberto Bellarmino condemned Plato as the most dangerous of all pagan philosophers precisely because his teaching was so similar to Christianity.⁴

The focus here is on that first major Renaissance breakdown of Christian and classical harmony in late fifteenth-century Florence. The conflict revolves around Marsilio Ficino and Girolamo Savonarola, the two major apologists for the Platonic and Christian traditions, in the new and politically contested republican environment established after the collapse of Medici power in 1494. The differences between the two men have been analysed and explained largely in intellectual and philosophical terms: Ficino advocated an elitist, gradual, top-down approach to spiritual reform, guided by the study of Plato, who was interpreted by the humanist as a divinely inspired philosopher who had helped prepare the classical world for the arrival of Christianity; while Savonarola advocated a sudden, popular, bottom-up approach to spiritual reform, rooted exclusively in Christian authors and biblical revelation.⁵ Under the earlier Medici regime, particularly the stable guiding hand of Lorenzo the Magnificent, under whom both Ficino and Savonarola had prospered, the

³ Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (New York, 1954), 351.

⁴ Antonio Rotondò, 'La censura ecclesiastica e la cultura', in Ruggiero Romano and Corrado Vivanti (eds.), *Storia d'Italia*, v, *I documenti* (Turin, 1973), 1455 ff.

⁵ On Ficino's integration of classical and Christian traditions and his pluralism, see Michael J. B. Allen, *Synoptic Art: Marsilio Ficino on the History of Platonic Interpretation* (Florence, 1998), 1–24.

relationship between humanist and friar had been initially sympathetic and their contrasting approaches to the proper religious life coexisted relatively amicably. After the French invasion of Italy and the expulsion of the Medici, however, Savonarola became an immensely influential public figure, while Ficino no longer enjoyed Medici preferment and protection. According to most accounts, the dangerous instability of the times injected Savonarola's message with more aggressive and urgent claims to exclusive truth. As Savonarola used his public sermons to mount ever more vocal critiques of the previous Medici regime and of the humanist activities of intellectuals associated with Lorenzo, Ficino departed from what he saw as the unwelcome Florentine environment, retiring to his nearby villa at Careggi in a state of bitter disillusionment.⁶

This article adds a detailed examination of the republican political context in which Ficino and Savonarola operated to the larger discussion of divergent intellectual traditions. It analyses the close relationship of each reformer to the Valori family, a prominent Florentine lineage who were major political figures in the new republic. Each in their own way, Ficino and Savonarola depended heavily on the loyalty and support of the Valori family, who therefore constitute a fundamental shared and overlapping context. Before 1494, the Valori family had been second only to the Medici in financial support of Ficino's Platonic project; after the fall of the Medici, the Valori remained committed to his Platonic studies and were his greatest patrons. Shortly after the establishment of the republic, Savonarola named Francesco Valori as one of the political captains of his following, and Francesco quickly became the most influential and controversial member of the Savonarolan movement.

Shifting the focus to the political context and the Valori patronage network that Savonarola and Ficino shared after 1494 suggests that some new questions are appropriate and yields some new answers to older questions. The article advances three arguments: (1) that Ficino became more closely involved with the Valori family after 1494, rather than more removed, and that there is as much evidence that he remained active in Florence

⁶ Paul Oskar Kristeller, *The Philosophy of Marsilio Ficino*, trans. Virginia Conant (Gloucester, Mass., 1964), 14–18; Donald Weinstein, *Savonarola and Florence: Prophecy and Patriotism in the Renaissance* (Princeton, 1970), 188, 216; Arnaldo della Torre, *Storia dell'Accademia Platonica di Firenze* (Florence, 1902).

as there is of his retreat from the republic; (2) that Savonarola was troubled by the Valori family's Platonic sympathies and continuing public support for Ficino, and that the timing and audience for his sharp escalation in public criticism of Plato are explained by the sustained Platonic allegiance of the most important family in Savonarola's following; and (3) that the patronage of Platonic philosophy was more than a matter of personal friendship between the Valori and Ficino, and that their public commitment to Ficino's project extended far into the sixteenth century and became a critical aspect of the Valori family 'myth', which also in part explains when and why another 'myth', that of Lorenzo de' Medici's connections to a Platonic academy, first emerged.

The article is structured in four parts. Part I briefly summarizes the Florentine political context from the death of Lorenzo the Magnificent (1492) to the trial and execution of Savonarola (1498), a background against which the rest of the article unfolds. Part II surveys Ficino's relationship with the Valori family and the political implications of Ficino's Platonism, and proposes a new interpretation of Ficino's final years that sees him actively engaged in the post-Medicean republic. Part III considers Savonarola's relationship with the Valori family and the friar's motives for and timing of his public criticism of Plato, and proposes a synthetic interpretation of his anti-Platonic stance that integrates long-standing intellectual differences with pressing political circumstances. Part IV examines the subsequent Platonic commitments of later generations of the Valori family, and demonstrates that their involvement with Ficino was not simply the product of a personal friendship, but a sustained and genuine intellectual conviction.

A few words of qualification: the arguments presented here are not an attempt to read the philosophical differences between Savonarola and Ficino as mere reflections of patronage concerns and political security; nor are they meant to deny real and meaningful contrasts in the two reformers' visions of the process by which Florentine society should reform itself — contrasts which, followed to their logical conclusions, left little theoretical space in which to acknowledge the viability of alternative paths to the necessary spiritual and philosophical reformation. The arguments do attempt, however, to show that the densely overlapping set of relationships between Ficino, Savonarola and the Valori family

are an essential element in a complete understanding of the close connections between prophecy, humanism and republicanism in Renaissance Florence. It follows also that the timing and urgency of the millenarian critique of humanism and the sudden chasm between Christian and Platonic revelation in late fifteenth-century Florence were closely connected to a particular political moment that was in no way inevitable. This point alone merits emphasis, given the privileged role that the events of late fifteenth-century Florence play in the larger narrative of the end of ecumenism in early modern Europe.

I

The crucial political development in the following analysis is the expulsion of the Medici family from Florence in 1494 and the reinvigoration of Florentine republicanism. For sixty years of the fifteenth century (1434–94), the Medici family had established themselves as *de facto* rulers of Florence. The city remained a republic in name and in theory, and the government consisted, at least nominally, of communal councils and deliberative assemblies. All clear-eyed observers nevertheless recognized that the sinews of power emanated from the private Medici *palazzo*, rather than the official seat of communal government, Palazzo della Signoria. The success of the Medici system of shadow government depended on respecting a delicate balance between the outward forms of communal institutions, the traditional republican sensibilities of the powerful Florentine patricians, and a centralized system of electoral controls and patronage involving the distribution of preferments. Perfected under Lorenzo the Magnificent, the system worked smoothly and reliably, with only a few significant breakdowns.⁷

After Lorenzo's death in 1492, however, power passed to his arrogant and less competent son Piero. Piero's youth and disinclination to consult the aristocratic captains of the Medici party began to alienate critical former supporters, and after the invasion of Italy by Charles VIII dramatically destabilized the political

⁷ My summary of the fifteenth-century Medici government and its downfall is based on Nicolai Rubinstein, *The Government of Florence under the Medici (1434–1494)* (Oxford, 1997), pt 3, and epilogue. On Medici shadow government and its most important breakdown under Lorenzo, see Lauro Martines, *April Blood: Florence and the Plot against the Medici* (Oxford, 2003).

context — the trickle of discontent became a flood. After Piero granted Charles VIII, who was fixated on Naples and needed to establish reliable communication lines down the length of the peninsula, control of key Florentine fortresses and Florence's two seaports of Pisa and Livorno, he was expelled from the city and declared an exile, and the Medicean system was thoroughly dismantled. The move against Piero and the establishment of the republic was the work of a small group of patricians, of whom the notable members were Piero Capponi, Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici, Bernardo Rucellai, Paolantonio Soderini and Francesco Valori. These men attempted to establish a relatively closed, aristocratically dominated regime, similar to the style of government that had prevailed in the early decades of the fifteenth century, prior to Medici ascendancy.

They perhaps would have succeeded without any concerted opposition had it not been for the unexpected and meteoric ascent of Savonarola to a position of considerable public authority. Since 1490, Savonarola had been presenting himself as a prophet and had been consistently warning Florentines in his sermons of imminent catastrophes. The invasion of Charles VIII and the arrival of his army at the gates of Florence appeared to Florentines to confirm Savonarola's status as a prophet, and from that moment on, those in and out of power looked to Savonarola for guidance on how best to find a safe procession through obviously perilous times. Savonarola used his influence to implement wide-ranging reforms of a traditional, ascetic Christian variety, preaching, for example, against gambling, prostitution and blasphemy, as well as outlining a sustained critique of pagan philosophy. Religious reform was linked in Savonarola's message to a particular vision of political reform. Contrary to the efforts of the initial architects of the new republic, Savonarola began to assume an increasingly vocal popular political stance, advocating that the city adopt a broad-based and inclusive variety of republicanism. He thereby played a critical role in raising the question of the social composition of the new republic, which quickly became the most contentious and bitterly divisive issue in the political arena.⁸

⁸ My summary of Savonarola's career in Florence is based on Lorenzo Polizzotto, *The Elect Nation: The Savonarolan Movement in Florence, 1494–1545* (Oxford, 1994), intro., and ch. 1.

The Savonarolan experiment in Florentine republicanism ended almost as quickly and dramatically as it had begun. Criticism of the Borgia papacy earned him the vigorous enmity of and eventual excommunication by Alexander VI, which added increased momentum to the efforts of Savonarola's Florentine enemies. Over time, Savonarola found it increasingly difficult to sustain widespread conviction in his prophetic powers, without which his position in the city had no authority. In 1498, after an inconclusive but nevertheless well-attended public spectacle intended to demonstrate God's Savonarolan favouritism, public opinion turned sharply against the friar. San Marco was put to the sack, as was the home of Francesco Valori, the most controversial Savonarolan politician. Savonarola was turned over to a Florentine government dominated by his opponents, tried and tortured by both civil and ecclesiastical authorities, and eventually executed and burned in the Piazza della Signoria.

II

As both patrons and friends, the Valori family were among Ficino's most loyal and powerful supporters.⁹ Filippo, Niccolò and Francesco Valori were all Ficino's students at one time or another, as well as active patrons of Ficino's work.¹⁰ Ficino began his project of translating Plato's dialogues in 1462, having received from Cosimo de' Medici a manuscript containing all of them in Greek. Shortly thereafter, he also received a similar manuscript from Amerigo Benci.¹¹ He translated the dialogues

⁹ For example, see the comments Filippo Valori wrote as accompaniments to the dedication copies of Ficino's writings (which he paid to have copied), in *Supplementum Ficinianum*, ed. Paul Oskar Kristeller, 2 vols. (Florence, 1937), i, 22, 65–6, 94–5, 104–5; Ficino's comments about the Valori in the preface to his *Commentaria in Platonem*, in Marsilio Ficino, *Opera omnia*, ed. Paul Oskar Kristeller and Mario Sancierpiano, 2 vols. (Turin, 1959–62), ii, pt 1, p. 1136; and the discussion by Della Torre in his *Storia dell'Accademia Platonica di Firenze*, 733–5.

¹⁰ See the list of Ficino's *auditores* in James Hankins, 'The Myth of the Florentine Platonic Academy', *Renaissance Quart.*, xlv (1991), 440–5. Filippo Valori tutored others as well, presumably because of affection for study, since he did not need the money. See the letters written to him by his student Michele Acciari in the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze (hereafter BNF), Filze Rinuccini, 17. On his income, see the *catasto* documents published by Armando F. Verde, *Lo studio fiorentino, 1473–1503: ricerche e documenti*, 5 vols. (Florence, 1973), iii, 741–2.

¹¹ *Supplementum Ficinianum*, ed. Kristeller, i, pp. cxlvii–clvii; Paul Oskar Kristeller, 'Marsilio Ficino as a Beginning Student of Plato', *Scriptorium*, xx (1966); Sebastiano Gentile, 'Note sui manoscritti greci di Platone utilizzati da Marsilio Ficino', in *Scuola normale superiore*, Pisa, *Scritti in onore di Eugenio Garin* (Pisa, 1987).

sporadically, completing the first ten by Cosimo's death in 1464 and, according to Kristeller, had probably completed at least a draft of them all by 1469. It was not until 1483 that he began immediate preparation for publication, turning to the Valori family for assistance. A few months later, in January 1484, Filippo Valori and Francesco Berlinghieri signed a contract with Fra Domenico da Pistoia and Lorenzo Veneto d'Alopa to publish 1,025 copies of Ficino's *Platonis opera omnia* at a printing press located in the Dominican convent of San Jacopo di Ripoli. In the autumn of the same year, the first edition was duly published, leading Ficino to sing the praises of Filippo in a letter to Iacopo Antiquario.¹²

The friendship was forged most strongly by Niccolò Valori's brother, Filippo di Bartolomeo. Part of Ficino's affection for Filippo stemmed from their mutual friendship with Lorenzo and their enthusiasm for Platonic studies. In the conclusion to his commentary on the *Timaeus* (1492), Ficino explained to Lorenzo that he was greatly indebted to Filippo Valori not only because of Valori's commitment to Platonism, but also because of the great esteem in which Filippo held Lorenzo and the Medici.¹³ In another letter to Lorenzo, Ficino wrote that he and Filippo had become one through their affection for Plato and Lorenzo.¹⁴ It was in a letter to Filippo that Ficino, encouraged by Cristoforo Landino and Cosimo de' Medici, announced his commitment to perfecting his Greek so that he could penetrate the Greek sources of Platonic doctrine.¹⁵ In 1490 Ficino sent Lorenzo an

¹² Paul Oskar Kristeller, 'The First Printed Edition of Plato's Works and the Date of its Publication', in Erna Hilfstein, Paweł Czaratoryski and Frank D. Grande (eds.), *Science and History: Studies in Honor of Edward Rosen* (Wrocław, 1978); Hankins, *Plato in the Italian Renaissance*, i, 300–1. 'Si librarii quondam nostros Platonis libros tanta diligentia impressissent, quanta Philippus Valor magnificentia exprimi procuraverat, optime nobiscum actum existimaremus. Libros autem de vita nostros exprimi sorte nuper felicior curavit, vir nobilissimus pariter atque optimus': Ficino, *Opera omnia*, ed. Kristeller and Sancipriano, i, pt 2, p. 906.

¹³ 'Philippo plurimum debere me fateor tum quia Platonica egregiaque omnia magnopere colit, tum quia singulari amore erga te tuosque omnes afficitur': Ficino, *Opera omnia*, ed. Kristeller and Sancipriano, ii, pt 2, p. 1466.

¹⁴ 'Dum vero Marsilium Ficinum nomino, Philippum quoque Valorem academici nostrum intellige pariter nominatum. Nam si Valor atque Marsilius in Platone defendendo et in te amando idem sunt, procul dubio inter se quoque sunt idem'. *Ibid.*, 1130.

¹⁵ 'Philippo Valori dilectissimo viro. Anno salutis humanae MCCCCLVI, quo ego quidem aetatis agebam tres atque viginti, tu vero natus es, primitias studiorum

elaborately illuminated commentary on Plotinus, funded by Filippo and containing an introductory letter written by Filippo to Lorenzo. Filippo explained that, knowing Ficino was about to send a copy of his commentary to Lorenzo, he felt the work lacked the external decoration befitting the celebrated library of Florence's first citizen. He therefore had taken steps to ensure that when Plotinus entered the resurrected Alexandrian library, he would do so not in the humble dress of the philosopher, but richly robed in wedding clothes, to honour the recurring marriage between the mind of readers of Plotinus and Wisdom.¹⁶

In the months after the failed 1478 Pazzi conspiracy to assassinate Lorenzo de' Medici, Filippo Valori had regularly replaced Lorenzo in the financing of copying and editing of Ficino's translations of Plato, a detail interpreted by Melissa Bullard and Riccardo Fubini as evidence of the frequently strained relationship Ficino had with every Medici after Cosimo.¹⁷ The aftermath of the abortive coup particularly strained Ficino's relationship with Lorenzo, as the humanist had been closely associated with Cardinal Riario and other conspirators. Valori's support was political as well as financial: Filippo Valori was among the close circle of the humanist's allies who rallied around him during Innocent VIII's investigation of Ficino on charges of magic and necromancy, the result of remarks made in the *Liber de vita* (1489).¹⁸ When Ficino's enemies, the *lupi rapaci*, as he called them, renewed against him their accusations of magic, this time prompted by the publication of *De Sole et Lumine* (1493), Ficino again turned to Filippo Valori for protection.¹⁹ The *Liber de*

(n. 15 cont.)

meorum auspicatus sum a libris quatuor Institutionum ad Platoniam disciplinam. Ad quas quidem componendas adhortatus est Christophorus Landinus, amicus-simus mihi, vir doctissimus. Cum autem ipse et Cosmus Medices peregrissent eas, probaverunt quidem: sed ut penes me servarem consuluerunt, quoad, Graecis literis erudiri, Platonicaque tandem ex suis fontibus haurirem'. *Ibid.*, i, pt 2, p. 929.

¹⁶ Published in Della Torre, *Storia dell'Accademia Platonica di Firenze*, 626.

¹⁷ Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Marsilio Ficino and his Work after Five Hundred Years* (Florence, 1987), 17; Riccardo Fubini, 'Ficino e i Medici all'avvento di Lorenzo il Magnifico'; and 'Ancora su Ficino e i Medici', both in his *Quattrocento fiorentino: politica, diplomazia, cultura* (Pisa, 1996); Melissa Meriam Bullard, 'Marsilio Ficino and the Medici: The Inner Dimensions of Patronage', in Timothy Verdon and John Henderson (eds.), *Christianity and the Renaissance* (Syracuse, 1990); also argued by Hankins, 'Myth of the Florentine Platonic Academy', 461-3.

¹⁸ Paul Oskar Kristeller, 'Marsilio Ficino and the Roman Curia', *Humanistica Lovaniensia*, xxxiv (1985).

¹⁹ Ficino, *Opera omnia*, ed. Kristeller and Sancipriano, ii, pt 2, pp. 943, 949.

vita, published by Filippo Valori, concluded with three distichs composed by Amerigo Corsini that praised Filippo as Ficino's supporter and protector, along with Giovanni Canacci, Piero del Nero, Piero Guicciardini and Piero Soderini.²⁰

Filippo was recognized as an accomplished student of Plato and his political career often brought him into close contact with Ficino's circle. He was chosen as a cultural ambassador when he was selected, along with a handful of leading patrician intellectuals, to visit Matthias Corvinus, the king of Hungary, and to bring the king Ficino's commentary on Plotinus.²¹ In Hungary, Filippo Valori came into contact with two of Ficino's former pupils and friends, Francesco Bandini and Prospero Buonaccorsi, to whom Ficino sent copies of the Valori-sponsored edition of the *Opera* (unfortunately marred by typographical errors).²²

Ficino often dined with Filippo, was a regular visitor at the Valori villa in Maiano, where he completed his commentary on the *Timaeus*, and remained on close terms until Filippo's death in 1494.²³ On another visit to the Valori villa in Maiano, Ficino began to translate Porphyry, who, Ficino claimed, would enable the philosopher to penetrate the hidden meaning of the divine oracle that Plotinus had set out in such obscure terms.²⁴ Ficino

²⁰ 'De triplici vita, quem tu, Ficine, libellum / Compositum in lucem mictere, docte, paras / Imprimere hunc doctus gratusque Valorius ultro / Curavit, doctis pabula grata viris; / Tresque Petri, binique Canes, Cursorve Amerigus / Contendent morsus pellere quisque feros'. Published in Della Torre, *Storia dell'Accademia Platonica di Firenze*, 624. On the *De triplici vita*, see the recent critical edition: Marsilio Ficino, *Three Books on Life*, ed. Carol Kaske and John Clark (Tempe, 1998).

²¹ On Filippo's visit to Hungary, see Ficino's letter to Francesco Bandini, in Ficino, *Opera omnia*, ed. Kristeller and Sancieriano, i, pt 2, p. 896; and a letter of Angelo Poliziano to Corvinus in Angelo Poliziano, *Opera*, 2 vols. (Lyons, 1545-6), ii, 246-7.

²² 'Quod Platonis nostri libri tandem ab impressoribus sint expressi, pia Philippi Valoris opera et magnifica manu factum est. Quod autem minus eleganter expressi id partim negligentia impressorum, vel potius oppressorum, partim, si dictu fas est, malignitate fortunae nobis accidisse putato'. Ficino, *Opera omnia*, ed. Kristeller and Sancieriano, i, pt 2, p. 872.

²³ See his letters to Filippo in *Supplementum Ficinianum*, ed. Kristeller, i, p. cxx; Ficino, *Opera omnia*, ed. Kristeller and Sancieriano, i, pt 2, pp. 859, 875, 887, 930, 932; ii, pt 2, p. 1466.

²⁴ 'Cum superioribus diebus apud Philippum et Nicolaum Valores in agro Maiano versarer et in quodam ibi secessu naturam daemonum indagarem, affuit repente Plotinus, divinumque oraculum de daemonibus nobis effudit, verbis et brevissimis et obscurissimis involutum. Visum itaque nobis operae pretium accire Porphyrium tum Plotini discipulum, tum perscrutandis daemonibus deditissimum, qui facile daemonicum sui praeceptoris involucrum nobis evolveret'. Ficino, *Opera omnia*, ed. Kristeller and Sancieriano, i, pt 2, pp. 878-9.

dedicated to Filippo his second redaction of the *Institutiones platonicae*, his translation of Priscian's *Comments* on the *De Anima* of Theophrastus, the *Liber de vita longa*, and book eight of his correspondence. On several occasions Filippo did more than fund and support Ficino's Platonic projects: on at least one occasion he spurred Ficino on and ensured he met his deadline with the Ripoli publishers, as Ficino revealed in a letter to Lorenzo;²⁵ on another occasion, when Ficino was distracted from finishing the *Commentaries* due to requested translations of other Platonic authors, Filippo assisted by copying the text of Plotinus and the *Commentaries*.²⁶ Ficino dedicated his treatise on health and longevity to Filippo Valori, hoping that, by extending Filippo's life, the treatise would also inevitably extend the patronage and protection of Plato that Filippo so assiduously promoted.²⁷ When Ficino's friend, the German scholar Martin Prenninger, undertook a visit to the papal court, Ficino wrote to Filippo, then Florentine ambassador in Rome, asking him to facilitate Prenninger's visit and lend his support.²⁸

Ficino frequently spoke of the goodwill that the Valori showed to him and to Plato. In a letter to Filippo, Ficino praised

²⁵ 'Decreveram, magnanime Laurenti, breviora hic quemadmodum argumentum decere videbatur, afferre, multaue amplioribus commentariis, quae in Timeum iam designavimus, reservare. Sed Philippus Valor, Platoniorum studiosissimus, penes quem universo Platonico operi in agro Maiano extremam manum imposui, plura me hic coegit effundere'. *Ibid.*, 859.

²⁶ From a letter to Francesco Bandini: 'Nihil iamdiu ad te scribe charissime mi Bandine, quoniam interea et tibi et omnibus multa conscribo. Utinam tam multum bona sint quam multa. Plotini libros omnes iamdiu me fecisse Latinos intellexisti, atque in eos commentaria scribere mox incoepisse, haec ad dimidium iam perduximus, et forsitan absolvisssem, nisi inter commentandum coactus fuisssem traducere insuper in Latinum Psellum Platicum de Demonibus et Synesium de Somniis atque et parte Porphyrium de Abstinencia, ac etiam divinum Iamblicum de Aegyptiorum Assyriorumque theologia et denique Priscianum Lydum Theophrasti mentem, de mente diligenter interpretantem, inter haec Philippus Valor, valoris et gratiae plenus, regie vestro omnium deditissimus, Plotini textus commentariaeque regi transcribit, volumine regio. Quinterniones iam tres atque triginta grandes sunt absoluti'. *Ibid.*, 895.

²⁷ 'Marsilii Ficini Proemium in librum de vita longa. M. F. Philippo Valori. Quamobrem, hortor et obsecro te, mi Valor, ut quanta semper opera gloriae Platonicae faves, tanta aliquando diligentia praecepta haec nostra de Vita producenda legas atque serves quibus diu vivens resurgenti nuper disciplinae Platonis diutius una cum magnanimo Laurentio Medici patrocinari possis'. *Ibid.*, 903.

²⁸ 'M. F. Philippo Valori. Meministi, mi Valor, quam ardentem nos amet Martinus noster Uranius, adeo ut et filium suum meo nomine Marsilium nuncupaverit nostrumque natalem instituerit celebrandum . . . Hic te salutabit, consilium aperiet suum, auxilium postulabit. Si memineris quam saepe de Martino dicere solebam, alter ego, non dubito quin habeas hunc in omnibus mirifice commendatum'. *Ibid.*, 930.

the Valori as instrumental in the revival of Plato and, for that reason, he explicitly compared them to the Medici, the other family to which he devoted an equal amount of admiration and affection.²⁹ In the dedication to Niccolò of the *Platonic Commentaries* (1496), Ficino considered the wisdom, integrity and political stature of Francesco Valori, comparing his political sagacity with his nephew Filippo's intellectual talents. He concluded that Francesco had impeccable integrity, comparing him to Cosimo de' Medici and reiterating Niccolò's assessment of Francesco as 'padre per affectione'.³⁰ Ficino then wrote that he was always in the habit of considering to whom he ought to dedicate his labours; with respect to the *Commentaries*, no family merited that dedication more than the Valori. For forty years, the Valori had been fostering and assisting the great Platonic project.³¹ Before Cosimo's death, Bartolomeo Valori had furnished Ficino with funds to assist his translation of the *Platonic Dialogues*, for which Ficino praised Bartolomeo Valori as a leading light of Florence, a talented student and a frequent interlocutor in Platonic discussions.³² Concerning Niccolò's elder brother, Filippo, Ficino praised his zeal for Plato and the Platonic philosophers, and described him as the most gifted of

²⁹ 'Opportune admodum librorum meorum vitae iamdiu aspirat domus Medica: aspirat simul et Valoria domus, quippe cum et hae familiae prorsus idem ubique velint, et opem medicam mox valetudinis prosperae Valor ipse sequatur et spiret semper utriusque familiae felicitati Deus omnipotens, et concordiam hanc servet antiquam'. *Ibid.*, 864.

³⁰ 'Franciscus interea patruus vester, aequae meritis de republica, vir omnium integerrimus . . . Franciscus Valor qui istuc legatus accedit, et patruus est Philippi, atque Nicolai, et mihi aetate quidem frater, sed reverentia pater. Vir profecto prudentia, integritate, auctoritate summa, quem quoties aspiciamus et audimus, quod et quotidie facimus quasi magnum illum Cosmum Medicem, quem vultu verbisque refert, spectare et audire videmur'. *Ibid.*, 906–7. For Ficino's other dedications to Niccolò, see *ibid.*, 904, 951–2.

³¹ 'Soleo semper in libris meis edendis diu mecum deliberare, cui potissimum labores meos dedicare debeam: in hac vero commentariorum Platoniorum editione, nullus mihi deliberationi locus relictus esse videtur; tanta enim nobis cum antiquissima Valorum familia iamdiu necessitudo conflata est, ut haec sibi iam mea omnia iure optimo vendicet. Maiores profecto tui, optime mi Nicolae, quadraginta iam annis sub Platone philosophati, platonica nobis opera elaborata summopere coluerunt'. *Ibid.*, ii, pt 2, p. 1136.

³² 'Primus quidem pater tuus Bartholomaeus Valor, vir admodum elegans et, ut ita dixerim, urbis nostrae delitiae, una cum socero suo Petro Paccio, clarissimo equite, enarrationibus disputationibusque in Platonem nostris frequenter interfuit, atque omni studio celebravit': *ibid.*

his peers in the 'Academy'.³³ Ficino then concluded in praise of the loyalty to him and to Plato shown by Francesco and Niccolò, particularly during the troubled and turbulent months after the expulsion of the Medici.³⁴ Niccolò Valori, according to Ficino, had been born under stars that were aligned in a particularly propitious arrangement for philosophical studies, which explains the frequency with which Niccolò philosophized with Ficino.³⁵ Ficino dedicated the eleventh book of his correspondence to Niccolò, praising him as a diligent student of Platonic wisdom and as a long-time supporter of Ficino's studies.³⁶

What evidence do we have for the perception that Ficino lived out his last years in the relative isolation of his villa in Careggi? In part, no doubt, the widespread acceptance of this view stems from the stature and authority of its proponents, such as Arnaldo della Torre and Paul Oskar Kristeller.³⁷ The evidence in these authors' studies is contained in a few of Ficino's letters, in which he laments the discord and instability of Florentine life. In 1494, Ficino wrote to Jean de Ganay in Florence that he had to pursue his studies in the country because of the turbulent times in the city.³⁸ This is hardly new, however, since Ficino completed much of his work on the Platonic and Plotinian corpus at Careggi and the Valori villa in Maiano, even during the golden age of philosophers under Lorenzo. In a 1497 letter to Aldo Manuzio, Ficino wrote that he could live comfortably

³³ 'Deinde frater tuus Philippus, natu maior, vir profecto magnanimus, more paterno disciplinam platoniam prosecutus, non solum Platonis ipsius sed Platoniorum quoque omnium libros, nostra iamdiu interpretatione latinos, magnifico sumptu in lucem e tenebris eruit, optime omnium hactenus de Academia meritis': *ibid.*

³⁴ 'Franciscus interea patruus vester, aequè meritis de republica, vir omnium integerrimus et magno illi Bartolomaeo avo suo similis in omnibus meis meorumque perturbationibus pio nos semper officio fovens, iampridem nobis haec otia fecit. Tu denique, tuorum erga Platonem atque Marsilium sequutus officia, curis me familiaribus, et his quidem frequentibus, quotidie levas, disciplinamque platoniam studiosissime colis'. *Ibid.*

³⁵ From a letter to Filippo Valori: 'quotidiana Nicolai fratris tui mecum philosophantis consuetudo': *ibid.*, i, pt 2, p. 952.

³⁶ '[Niccolò] . . . observator platonicae sapientiae diligens, et studiorum meorum diuturne servator': *ibid.*, 904, 951.

³⁷ See n. 6 above.

³⁸ 'Cum propter hospitium domesticorum turbae et publicos tumultus tranquille isthic philosophari non possem, philosophicum tamen officium mihi perpetuum intermittere nollem, in rusticam solitudinem ex urbe secessi': Ficino, *Opera omnia*, ed. Kristeller and Sancipriano, i, pt 2, p. 964.

neither in the city nor the country, which seems more to imply that in these years Ficino had not settled on Careggi as his primary dwelling, but more likely that he was frequently drawn into the city.³⁹

The supposition that Ficino must have been ill at ease in Florence after 1494 might also in part be the result of Corsi's biography of Ficino (1506) and the 'myth' of the Platonic Academy. It follows that if Ficino had been a committed Medicean intellectual, he would have found Florence during Savonarola's years an unwelcome place. Corsi's biography describes Ficino in this way, but, as a Medici partisan eager to present Ficino as primarily a Medicean intellectual, he had an obvious interpretative interest in downplaying Ficino's contacts with the republican regime.⁴⁰ Finally, from Della Torre onwards, many scholars have inferred that Ficino abandoned Florence after the fall of the Medici because the general intellectual climate encouraged by Savonarola was explicitly inimical to Ficino's philosophical mission.

There are a number of details, however, that point to a pattern in Ficino's life after 1494 of sustained activity and interests in Florence. In 1495, Ficino was invited to Venice by the Tuscan Piero Dovizi, an offer that must have been attractive.⁴¹ The turbulence of Florentine political life in the wake of the Medici collapse and the factional rivalries that it had unleashed might have discouraged scholars from working in the city; if so, moving to Venice would have offered Ficino better working conditions and more intellectual companions than he could have expected in the Florentine orbit. If Ficino, as he occasionally suggested in his letters from this period, resented the tumults of Florentine politics because they prevented him from gathering his books and working in peace, he would probably have accepted the invitation. Venice was a major international publishing capital and, therefore, an ideal location to pursue his studies. Ficino,

³⁹ Ficino in *Supplementum Ficinianum*, ed. Kristeller, ii, 95. 'Ego vero isthic tempestate hac curare non possum. Preter enim id quod valitudinarius sum, nec in urbe, nec in suburbis habitare tuto possum nec meos qui in civitate sparsi sunt libros colligere. Tres enim furie Florentiam iamdiu miseram assidue vexant, morbus pestilens et fames atque seditio, atque id quod acerbius est, una cum ceteris mortaliū dissimulationibus dissimulata pestis'.

⁴⁰ Corsi's biography is published as an appendix to Raymond Marcel, *Marsile Ficin (1433-1499)* (Paris, 1958), 680-9.

⁴¹ Ficino in *Supplementum Ficinianum*, ed. Kristeller, ii, 218-20.

however, did not accept the invitation, which suggests that he had interests and obligations that could only be met in Florence.

The absence of his former Medici patrons did not leave Ficino isolated. Even under Lorenzo, he cultivated friendships and relied on patronage outside the Medici circle, and was himself on several occasions removed from the inner circle of Medici favour. We know that Ficino's relations with Lorenzo de' Medici were troubled at times and that he relied much more on the support of other patrician families than Corsi admitted.⁴² During Cosimo's lifetime, Ficino had sought the patronage of Otto Niccolini, who requested that Ficino translate the *Minos*.⁴³ In Piero de' Medici's time, Ficino dedicated the *Sophist* (1466) to Michele Mercati da San Miniato and the *Politicus* to Migliore Cresci, though these were eventually rededicated to Lorenzo de' Medici and Federigo of Urbino. Ficino's initial dedication of the *Commentarium in Convivium de amore* was to Giovanni Cavalcanti (d. 1497), a close friend of Ficino's both before and after 1494 (this too was rededicated to Lorenzo when republished in the *Platonis opera omnia* edition).⁴⁴ Ficino sought, unsuccessfully, the patronage of Bernardo Rucellai (1449–1514) in the 1480s and it was the Valori family who funded the Ripoli edition of the *Platonis opera omnia* (1484).⁴⁵ In James Hankins's words, '[l]ike many Florentines, Ficino was most enthusiastic about the Medici when they were powerless or dead'.⁴⁶

The only immediate change brought about by the political revolution of November 1494 for Ficino was a reorientation of his political relationships; his secondary political contacts under the Medici became his principal political contacts in the restored

⁴² In addition to Hankins, 'Myth of the Florentine Platonic Academy', see also Fubini, 'Ficino e i Medici all'avvento di Lorenzo il Magnifico'; Fubini, 'Ancora su Ficino e i Medici'.

⁴³ Ficino in *Supplementum Ficinianum*, ed. Kristeller, i, p. cxlix.

⁴⁴ Ficino: *ibid.*, p. cli; Sebastiano Gentile, 'In margine all'epistola *De divino furore* di Marsilio Ficino', *Rinascimento*, xxiii (1983); Hankins, *Plato in the Italian Renaissance*, i, 305.

⁴⁵ Kristeller, 'First Printed Edition of Plato's Works'. The contract is printed in Emilia Nesi, *Il diario della stamperia di Ripoli* (Florence, 1903), 103–6: 'Come questo di 25 di gennaio 1483–84 il venerabile Frate Domenico priore sindaco e procuratore del munistero di Sancto Iacopo di Ripoli di Firenze e come sindaco e procuratore di detto luogo et Lorenzo di Francesco da Vinegia conducono a imprimere piu dialogi di Platone da Francesco di Niccolò Berlinghieri et Filippo di Bartolomeo Valori in questo modo'.

⁴⁶ Hankins, *Plato in the Italian Renaissance*, i, 306.

republic. He was well connected with leading statesmen of the republic, such as the Soderini. Giovanni Cavalcanti, one of Ficino's closest friends, in whom Ficino confided and with whom he philosophized, quickly emerged as a fundamental political figure in the months following the expulsion. Cavalcanti was made an ambassador to Charles VIII in 1494 (along with Savonarola), was sent early in 1495 as an ambassador to the Sforza court in Milan, and became a prior later in 1495.⁴⁷

If Ficino had been disillusioned with Florentine politics and intellectual currents after 1494, we would expect his retreat to Careggi to be accompanied by less political and intellectual contact with republican statesmen, but the opposite is true. Ficino cultivated the intellectual and political patronage of the Valori family more explicitly than ever before, and their relationship became considerably closer than that between an intellectual patron and client. In 1496, Ficino became the godfather to Niccolò's son, Filippo, and was one of two others present at the boy's baptism.⁴⁸ A year earlier, Ficino established another family alliance with a Valori connection. Ficino's niece Alessandra da Daniele married Biagio Buonaccorsi, a prominent figure in the republic and a friend of the Valori. Ficino attended the wedding and promised Biagio a dowry of 850 florins.⁴⁹ Three years later, Niccolò established a perpetual lease of property in the Val di Marina that belonged to the church of San Lorenzo. Ficino acted as Niccolò's agent in the transaction. He prepared and sent the petition to Alexander VI, received the pope's response, and was a witness to the transaction, which took place in Ficino's house. There is not only notarial evidence for this, but a detailed account in the family diary, setting out for future generations the assistance that Ficino had provided.⁵⁰ After his brother Filippo's death in 1494, Niccolò assumed his patronage of Ficino's Platonic works, paying for the publication of Ficino's *Platonic Commentaries* in 1496. It is also possible that,

⁴⁷ Della Torre, *Storia dell'Accademia Platonica di Firenze*, 647–54.

⁴⁸ BNF, Panciatichi, 134: Niccolò Valori, 'Ricordanze', fo. 22^v.

⁴⁹ Buonaccorsi, c. 1^r, catalogued by S. Gentile, S. Niccoli and P. Viti (eds.), *Marsilio Ficino e il ritorno di Platone: mostra di manoscritti stampe e documenti* (Florence, 1984), 190.

⁵⁰ BNF, Panciatichi, 134: Niccolò Valori, 'Ricordanze', fo. 26^v; BNF, Fondo Principale, II. I. 526, fos. 6^v–11^v. The description of Ficino's assistance in the diary is not included in Kristeller's catalogue of Ficino documents, *Marsilio Ficino and his Work after Five Hundred Years*.

through the informal tutoring that Ficino had provided, Niccolò Valori formed lasting friendships and political alliances with Ficino's other *auditores*.⁵¹ Of the thirteen names of his students which Ficino listed in his letter to Martin Prenninger, seven of them recur regularly in the pages of the Valori family diary that Niccolò wrote in the 1490s, especially Bernardo Canigiani, the alliance with whom is also discussed in the family account books, and Antonio Lanfredini, who appears on almost every page as a trusted ally.⁵²

In addition to the documents showing that Ficino's relations with the Valori after 1494 became closer, rather than more distant, there are several other documents that place him in Florence and that suggest he was involved with the Savonarolan circle. Although the evidence is admittedly circumstantial, it is no more so than evidence to the contrary. In the light of the close relations between the Valori and Ficino and the prominence of Niccolò and Francesco in the republican regime, the following documents may point to a larger pattern of Ficino's activity in Florence.

In the first months of 1495, the Standard Bearer of Justice, Filippo Corbizzi, convened a theological assembly to condemn Savonarola's involvement in the political life of the city. An influential gathering, it included the priors of the Florentine abbeys, two canons of the cathedral, and two canons of San Lorenzo, as well as doctors in theology. Ficino was included in this assembly, invited in his capacity as a canon of the Florentine cathedral. Ficino's approval of Savonarola was unequivocal: he declared that he had never known anyone with such a profound command of Christian doctrine before he met Savonarola.⁵³

⁵¹ On Ficino's tutoring, see Emilio Cristiani, 'Una inedita invettiva giovanile di Marsilio Ficino', *Rinascimento*, 2nd ser., vi (1966); Samuel Jones Hough, 'An Early Record of Marsilio Ficino', *Renaissance Quart.*, xxx (1977).

⁵² BNF, Panciatichi, 134: Niccolò Valori, 'Ricordanze', fos. 16–21; Archivio di Stato di Firenze (hereafter ASF), Dono Panciatichi, Patrimonio Valori, Libri d'azienda, 3, fos. 144^v, 150^v. See the list of Ficino's *auditores* in Hankins, 'Myth of the Florentine Platonic Academy', 440–5.

⁵³ According to Pacifico Burlamacchi, *Vita Hieronymi Savonarolae* (Lucca, 1761), 77–84. 'Fra' quali fu il primo il Gonfalonieri di giustizia fatto nel principio della liberta, domandato Filippo Corboli il quale raguna contra il padre un concilio di tutti gli Abbati, Priori et Presidenti . . . tutti i maestri in Theologia, due Canonici del Duomo, due del Capitolo di S. Lorenzo et altri dottori et cittadini intelligenti, fra' quali era un singularissimo huomo, domandato Marsilio Ficino, Canonico del duomo . . . Et il Ficino disse che non aveva mai conosciuto insino a quell tempo altro huomo di si profonda dottrina'. Cited from Marcel, *Marsile Ficin*, 564.

A few months later, in August 1495, the Dominicans of San Marco offered to buy the Medici library for 3,000 florins from the Signoria, who had appropriated it in 1494 and whose financial difficulties prompted them to sell it. Before the sale, the priors established a committee to select certain titles that were to remain in the direct possession of the government because of their value and importance. The priors appointed Savonarola and Ficino to this committee, both ideal choices given their prestige as scholars and their intimate familiarity with the contents of the Medici library.⁵⁴ Ficino, at this point, was still involved in Florentine political and intellectual life and he was working side by side with Savonarola.⁵⁵ Both Pacifico Burlamacchi and Luca Landucci report that Ficino and a group of philosophers travelled to Prato to hear a sermon of Savonarola's directed to the professors and students of the *studio*.⁵⁶ The execution of his old friend Bernardo del Nero in August 1497, along with four other Florentine aristocrats convicted of conspiring to restore Piero de' Medici to power, apparently did not alienate Ficino from Florence, in spite of the bitterly divisive effect of the executions and the consequent sharp escalation in factional tensions.⁵⁷ A document from the *Notarile antecosimiano* indicates that Ficino purchased a house in the heart of the city a month after the executions.⁵⁸

Given the political and spiritual role Ficino assigned to Platonic philosophy in Florence, it is difficult to see how a retreat away from politics into philosophy would have made sense to

⁵⁴ Pasquale Villari, *La storia di Girolamo Savonarola e de' suoi tempi*, 2 vols. (Florence, 1861), i, p. cxlviii; for the commission, see ASF, Signori, Deliberazioni in forza di ordinaria autorità, 97, c. 96^v, catalogued in Gentile, Niccoli and Viti (eds.), *Marsilio Ficino e il ritorno di Platone*, 190.

⁵⁵ It is possible that the two men owed their appointment to this committee to the influence of Francesco Valori, who, with nineteen other *accoppiatori* in June 1495, had just finished reappointing all the city's major political offices. He was also at the time of the appointment a member of the Ten on Liberty and Peace and a member of the Council of Eighty.

⁵⁶ Gentile, Niccoli and Viti (eds.), *Marsilio Ficino e il ritorno di Platone*, 191; Luca Landucci, *A Florentine Diary from 450 to 1516*, ed. Iodoco del Badia, trans. Alice de Rosen Jervis (London, 1927), p. xx.

⁵⁷ Lauro Martines discusses the legal positions in his *Lawyers and Statecraft in Renaissance Florence* (Princeton, 1968), 442–8; for Francesco Valori's role in the affair, see Mark Jurdjevic, 'Machiavelli's Sketches of Francesco Valori and the Reconstruction of Florentine History', *Jl Hist. Ideas*, lxiii (2002), 18–20.

⁵⁸ ASF, *Notarile antecosimiano*, M 238/2, cc. 5^v–6^r, catalogued in Gentile, Niccoli and Viti (eds.), *Marsilio Ficino e il ritorno di Platone*, 192.

him. Even under Lorenzo, Ficino saw factionalism and dissent as the consequence of the absence of a proper moral philosophy, one capable of simultaneously addressing the spiritual and civic needs of the patriciate. If his Platonic dialogues engaged young, educated Florentines and encouraged a unity of will and sense of spiritual concord in the 1470s and 1480s, how much more necessary would his presence be after 1494, when the plots, dissent and pursuit of private ends seemed to plague the republic? Rather than encouraging good men to abandon politics, as Hans Baron and Eugenio Garin believed, Ficino's Platonism was a crucial link between the health of the individual and the body politic. By encouraging fraternal love, the ruling class would set aside its personal interests and quarrels and pursue the common good; and the unification of wisdom and power, long the goal of humanist education, could finally be achieved.⁵⁹ If, as Hankins has argued, Ficino sincerely believed that his doctrine of Plato *redivivus* could still the violent waters of Florentine political troubles, then his philosophy would be all the more crucial after 1494.⁶⁰

Ficino's life prior to 1494 certainly suggested that he understood his life and actions in Florence and his philosophy as dynamically linked. For much of the 1450s, Ficino was closely associated with a confraternity centred around Lorenzo Pisano, a canon of the church of San Lorenzo, who was a spiritual guide to a distinguished group of Florentine intellectuals and patricians.⁶¹ His self-proclaimed gift of prophecy came to him not during moments of abstract metaphysical speculation, but rather in matters of hard-headed questions of Florentine politics. During the conflict with Naples that followed the abortive Pazzi conspiracy in 1478, Ficino dreamt that King Ferrante (1459–94) had been visited by his deceased father, Alfonso, who spoke to him in an angelic language. In a letter to Cardinal Giovanni d'Aragona, Ficino interpreted Alfonso's speech as advice to his son to pursue peace with the Florentine republic.⁶² Ficino had

⁵⁹ On this subject more generally, see Eugene Rice, *The Renaissance Idea of Wisdom* (Cambridge, Mass., 1958).

⁶⁰ Hankins, *Plato in the Italian Renaissance*, i, 297.

⁶¹ Arthur Field, *The Origins of the Platonic Academy of Florence* (Princeton, 1988), ch. 6.

⁶² 'Alfonsus Rex felicissimus avus tuus, venerande pater, nuper Ferdinando patri tuo felicissimo regi oraculum effudit ex alto angelica lingua; Marsilius Ficinus (nescio

(cont. on p. 60)

an elaborate vision of the complex relationship between Neoplatonism, ancient religion, and the Judaeo-Christian tradition that divided history into periods of religious 'revelation' and periods of religious 'veiling'. Inspirational eras, in which religion and philosophy were united, were followed by eras of veiling caused by the divorce of religion and philosophy, and evident in widespread superstition, ignorance and error. In this scheme of history, the arrival of Plato marked a significant moment of inspiration, followed by an era of ignorance that ended with the arrival of Christ, followed by yet another long stage of veiling that ended with the early Platonic philosophers, upon whom Origen and Augustine relied in their resurrection of religious wisdom. Finally, after another extended episode of veiling, Ficino believed that the Florence of his day would witness another major moment of revelation and that Divine Providence had chosen him as the vehicle for the resurrection of religious wisdom.⁶³ Hankins has described Ficino's religious sensibilities as those of the 'ecstatic, the prophet, the seer with a vision who strove to impress that vision powerfully onto other souls'.⁶⁴

An essential element of Ficino's vision of reform was spiritual and even prophetic, the significance of which should shortly become clear. He had himself helped to create the receptive climate to prophecy in Florence, and, as Christopher Celenza has shown, Ficino successfully cast himself in a Pythagorean prophetic role.⁶⁵ He believed that he had the gift of prophecy, passed down from his mother, and that he was therefore capable of prophetic interpretation of dreams.⁶⁶ Platonism was necessary for Florence not just because of its utility for secular civic concord, but also for a proper reformation of the Church. He began his *De christiana religione* (1476) with the emphatic conviction

(n. 62 cont.)

quo spiritus raptus) interfuit, audivit, servavit, atque oraculum ipsum angelica tunc ab Alfonso lingua pronuntiatur, ipse in linguam humanam tibi hodie transtulit': Ficino, *Opera omnia*, ed. Kristeller and Sancipriano, i, pt 2, p. 816.

⁶³ Hankins, *Plato in the Italian Renaissance*, i, 282-4; Charles Trinkaus, *In our Image and Likeness: Humanity and Divinity in Italian Humanist Thought*, 2 vols. (Chicago, 1970), ii, 683-721.

⁶⁴ Hankins, *Plato in the Italian Renaissance*, i, 278.

⁶⁵ Christopher Celenza, 'Pythagoras in the Renaissance: The Case of Marsilio Ficino', *Renaissance Quart.*, lii (1999).

⁶⁶ *Supplementum Ficinianum*, ed. Kristeller, i, 86; and discussion by Hankins in his *Plato in the Italian Renaissance*, i, 287-9.

that religion had become debased because its practitioners were essentially ignorant of philosophical wisdom.⁶⁷ Furthermore, the required philosophical wisdom was explicitly Platonist, not Aristotelian. As Hankins has shown, Ficino believed not only that Plato's philosophy benefited Christians more directly than that of Aristotle, but also that scholastic Latin in an Aristotelian and Thomist framework would fail to inspire the Florentine patriciate. The latter point was a largely aesthetic priority, but the former was elaborately articulated by Ficino in philosophical terms. In a tradition of humanist criticism that had originated with Gemistos Pletho and Cardinal Bessarion, Ficino criticized Aristotle for denying direct divine causality in the material world and for his views of the soul. In a description of the world as occupied by two antagonistic groups of Aristotelian Peripatetics, Ficino wrote:

For almost the entire world is occupied and divided between two sects of Peripatetics, the Alexandrians and the Averroists. The one sect think our intellect is mortal, the other contend that it is one. Both schools alike are wholly destructive of religion, especially as they seem to deny that there is any divine providence over men, and in both cases they seem to have been failed by their Aristotle.⁶⁸

The Averroist approach to Aristotle also seemed particularly threatening to Ficino because it held that Aristotle had denied the immortality of the soul. For Ficino, the proof of his conviction that Platonic philosophy contained the key to regeneration lay in the almost miraculous speed with which his Platonic studies permeated the Florentine political and intellectual elite, in spite of the dominance of Averroist Aristotelianism in the most important universities, such as Bologna and Padua. In a letter to Giovanni Pico, for example, Ficino praised Pico as a 'fisher of

⁶⁷ Hankins, *Plato in the Italian Renaissance*, i, 288; Rice, *Renaissance Idea of Wisdom*, 58–68.

⁶⁸ Printed and translated in Hankins, *Plato in the Italian Renaissance*, i, 274. 'Totus enim ferme terrarum orbis a Peripateticis occupatus in duas plurimum sectas divisus est, Alexandrinam et Averroicam. Illi quidem intellectum nostrum esse mortalem existimant, hi vero unicum esse contendunt. Utrique religionem omnem funditus aequae tollunt, praesertim quia divinam circa homines providentiam negare videntur, et utrobique a suo etiam Aristotele defecisse': from Ficino, *Opera omnia*, ed. Kristeller and Sancieriano, i, pt 2, p. 871. Ficino made similar statements in letters to Johannes Pannonius and Giovanni Cavalcanti, as well as in the *Platonic Theology*: see Hankins, *Plato in the Italian Renaissance*, i, 274.

men' because Pico had successfully used Plato to 'bait' Averroists and Epicureans back to Christianity.⁶⁹

But Ficino, as we know, was not the only spiritual reformer of a prophetic bent in late fifteenth-century Florence. Celenza concluded his discussion of Ficino's prophetic Neopythagoreanism by noting that, 'as Ficino's personal quest grew more complicated, somehow he lost his self-fashioned hierophantic status as well as his followers to the fiery Dominican eschatologist Girolamo Savonarola'.⁷⁰ The following section adds some new elements to our understanding of how and why that happened.

III

Why did Savonarola first preach in public against Plato and Platonic philosophers? This question has never really been asked, simply because from an intellectual perspective it appears natural that Savonarola would have been critical of the Platonic movement in Florence. Savonarola was a Dominican, trained in Aristotelian and Thomist thought. In spite of his early connections and political debts to the Medici family, he eventually became an outspoken critic of the family in the years after their fall. Considering the prominent role played by the Medici in support of Ficino and his Platonic project, it comes as no surprise that Savonarola rejected the utility of Platonic philosophy for Florentines and criticized the activities of Platonic philosophers.

Upon closer scrutiny, however, these general observations quickly become complicated. Donald Weinstein has shown that Savonarola appealed to many Florentine Platonists, and he and Celenza have demonstrated that the success of Savonarola's identity as a prophet, upon which his mission in Florence hinged, owed much to the expectations of the arrival of a Hermetic seer

⁶⁹ Michael J. B. Allen, 'The Second Ficino-Pico Controversy: Parmenidean Poetry, Eristic, and the One', in Gian Carlo Garfagnini (ed.), *Marsilio Ficino e il ritorno di Platone: studi e documenti*, 2 vols. (Florence, 1986), ii; Michael J. B. Allen, 'Marsilio Ficino's Interpretation of Plato's Timaeus and its Myth of the Demiurge', in James Hankins, John Monfasani and Frederick Purnell, Jr (eds.), *Supplementum Festivum: Studies in Honor of Paul Oskar Kristeller* (Binghamton, 1987); Hankins, *Plato in the Italian Renaissance*, i, 286-7.

⁷⁰ Celenza, 'Pythagoras in the Renaissance', 706.

that had been fostered by Ficino and the Platonists.⁷¹ On the connection to the Medici, consider James Hankins's cautionary remarks about the connection between the Medici, Ficino and Platonism: when it served him, Ficino tended to make considerably more of the relationship than can be shown to have existed, and Medici partisans, such as Ficino's biographer Giovanni Corsi, consistently exaggerated the connections.⁷² And, as Hankins has also made clear, the tradition connecting the Medici to Neoplatonism began only in the early sixteenth century, well after Savonarola had started to attack Plato in his sermons.⁷³

We have several explanations of Savonarola's motives, both political and intellectual. Given Savonarola's friendship with many Platonists and his own admission that he had been strongly influenced by Plato, Alison Brown has concluded that his attack on Plato from the pulpit after 1494 must have reflected 'principally political motives'.⁷⁴ She argues that Savonarola, recognizing the degree to which Platonism was associated with the Medici regime, began to attack Plato in order to dissociate himself and his past from the preceding regime. Weinstein has situated Savonarola's position towards Plato within a larger chronological context; he presents Savonarola as the beneficiary of divergent tendencies in the circle of Laurentian philosophers, the inheritor of a more sombre philosophical approach to Christianity than Ficino desired.⁷⁵ Lorenzo Polizzotto has argued that the break between Ficino and Savonarola was inevitable, and that they had only initially shared a propensity for millenarian prophecy and the assumption that the present Church was in a state of

⁷¹ Weinstein, *Savonarola and Florence*, ch. 6; Christopher Celenza, *Piety and Pythagoras in Renaissance Florence: The Symbolum Nesianum* (Leiden, 2001), 34–52; Celenza, 'Pythagoras in the Renaissance'.

⁷² Hankins, 'Myth of the Florentine Platonic Academy'; Hankins, *Plato in the Italian Renaissance*, i, 298–9; on Corsi, see Alberto Maria Ghisalberti, *Dizionario biografico degli Italiani* (Rome, 1960–).

⁷³ Hankins argues that the special connection between Lorenzo and Platonism was made for the first time in the early sixteenth century by Giovanni Corsi and Niccolò Valori. Valori's *Vita di Lorenzo de' Medici* was more likely composed in the late fifteenth century; it does not refer in any specific way to a Platonic academy presided over by Lorenzo and Ficino. It merely presents Lorenzo as an ideal example of a Platonic ruler, combining wisdom and virtue in political life. See below.

⁷⁴ Alison Brown, 'Platonism in Fifteenth-Century Florence and its Contribution to Early Modern Political Thought', *Jl Mod. Hist.*, lviii (1986), 403.

⁷⁵ Weinstein, *Savonarola and Florence*, 191–2.

precipitous decline. The inevitability of the break stemmed from Ficino's conviction that reform was gradual, elitist and guided by philosophical speculation, whereas Savonarola viewed the necessary reform of society as sudden, violent, popular and guided in every way by Scripture as the ultimate source of knowledge.⁷⁶

There is much to agree with in these arguments, though some points of chronology and audience could stand greater clarification. For Brown's argument, there is a problem of chronology. Savonarola's anti-Medicean position evolved slowly from 1494 to 1495. During the first year after the expulsion, he was more active as a force of reconciliation between the Medici and their opponents than he was as a publicly committed Medici foe; yet his attacks on Plato and Platonic philosophers pre-dated his anti-Medicean position.⁷⁷ For Weinstein's argument, there is a problem with audience. To whom would Savonarola be addressing these attacks in 1495–6, with Ficino allegedly disaffected from the city, Pico and Poliziano dead, and Nesi and Benivieni followers of Savonarola?⁷⁸ Polizzotto's argument complements Weinstein's, though he too does not address the question of Savonarola's audience. He suggests that Ficino had been critical of Savonarola prior to 1498, but only voiced this publicly after April 1498 because only then was it politically propitious. The question remains: to whom was Savonarola addressing these passages of his sermons and whom did he see in their midst, proselytizing Florentines on behalf of the pagan philosopher?

Angelo Poliziano and Giovanni Pico both died in 1494, while Giovanni Nesi and Girolamo Benivieni had at least formally positioned themselves in the Savonarolan intellectual camp.⁷⁹ Ficino, we are told by many, had retired to Careggi and was not active in Florence between 1494 and 1498. Francesco Cattani da Diacceto was most likely in Florence in these years, but there is no evidence of any contact between Diacceto and

⁷⁶ Polizzotto, *Elect Nation*, 95–6.

⁷⁷ For Savonarola's continued support of the Medici immediately after 1494, see Lorenzo Polizzotto, 'Lorenzo il Magnifico, Savonarola and Medicean Dynasticism', in Bernard Toscani (ed.), *Lorenzo de' Medici: New Perspectives* (New York, 1993), 351–5.

⁷⁸ Celenza, *Piety and Pythagoras in Renaissance Florence*, 42–5, suggests that Nesi may also have been trying to maintain a double allegiance to Ficino and Savonarola.

⁷⁹ Polizzotto, *Elect Nation*, ch. 1.

Savonarola. Diacceto's first appointment to a university position in Florence came in 1502, four years after Savonarola's death. Furthermore, Diacceto was Ficino's pupil and deeply in awe of his mentor: 'everything we are — if indeed we are anything — we are because of Marsilio Ficino', he wrote.⁸⁰ If influential Florentine intellectuals were going to be seduced away from the Savonarolan project to a Platonic variation of Christian reform, it seems unlikely that Diacceto would propose himself for the task while Ficino still lived — the man whom contemporaries called a 'second Plato'.⁸¹

The Valori were cementing a close relationship with Girolamo Savonarola at precisely the same time that they were making Ficino an extended family member. The family's connection with the friar appears to have been based both on mutual political utility and intellectual respect for Savonarola's programme of moral reform. Niccolò recorded in the family diary that he spoke to Savonarola shortly after the death of his brother Filippo in Naples, where he had been stationed as an ambassador. Niccolò praised Savonarola as a man of utmost honesty, while Savonarola praised Filippo Valori as an honoured citizen who lived justly.⁸² Niccolò's attendance at Savonarola's sermons was sufficiently well known for Alexander VI to excommunicate him; the pope lifted the ban in 1498, after Savonarola's death.⁸³ Reflecting on the injustice of Savonarola's death, Niccolò described Savonarola as the religious light of his times.⁸⁴ Niccolò was appointed commissary-general to Pistoia in 1501, charged with quelling the disruptive conflict between the Cancellieri and

⁸⁰ On Diacceto, see Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Studies in Renaissance Thought and Letters* (Rome, 1956), ch. 15.

⁸¹ For testimonies about Ficino as a second Plato, see Della Torre, *Storia dell'Accademia Platonica di Firenze*, 628–9.

⁸² 'Ricordo come adi 29 Novembre 1494, piacque adio tirare ad se le benedetta anima di Filippo mio fratello circa a hore 7 di notte, essendo ambasciadore a napoli per la nostra citta, che a dio piacci haverci facto verace perdonno, Il che mi persuade acederlo la vita che etenne, et . . . inteso che e passo con grandissima quiete et bene examino la coscienza sua, facciendosi caso dogni minima cosa, adme ha decto fra hieronimo da ferrara, a provamo religioso, havere visti io praticha pochi di piu netta conscientia di lui, fu in vita molto honorato, et visse con buona gratia, e lasciando gli altri honori che gli hebbe fu oratore a roma di 24 anni dove satisfecce assai'. BNF, Panciatichi, 134: Niccolò Valori, 'Ricordanze', fo. 22^v.

⁸³ ASF, Dono Panciatichi, 184, box 1, doc. 7.

⁸⁴ BNF, Panciatichi, 134: Niccolò Valori, 'Ricordanze', fo. 17^v: 'Et non molto tempo di poi feriamo quella . . . sceleratezza di fare abruciare il padre e lume de suoi tempi di religione doctrina et sanctità'.

Panciatichi factions.⁸⁵ In a number of letters to Lanfredino Lanfredini, Niccolò's brother-in-law, Niccolò described his actions and mission in Pistoia in distinctly Savonarolan terms: he believed that the rival factions' willingness to cause political discord was impious, that God would repay such impiety in kind, and that his task as commissary-general was to unify the factions into a single, broadly based and unified regime.⁸⁶ Sometime after May 1495 Niccolò's uncle, Francesco Valori, contacted Savonarola, suggesting that Savonarola could more effectively implement his great *opera* if the *frateschi* had a political as well as a spiritual leader. Savonarola recognized that the discord amongst his followers had alienated prominent citizens initially inclined to support his cause. He therefore concluded that there could be 'no unity without a leader' and promoted Francesco as secular head of the *frateschi* faction.⁸⁷

Let us now consider Savonarola's criticism of Plato, which, in the context of the previous discussion, will emerge in a new light. Savonarola's public criticism of Plato and the ancient philosophers began to increase in intensity in the final days of the Medicean regime and the months following the establishment of the new republic. In a sermon of 3 November 1494, Savonarola warned Florentines that to be true Christians, they had to renounce pagan philosophy and philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle, who did not understand how to find or pursue a Christian way of life.⁸⁸ In May 1496 he declared that true Christian knowledge ridiculed Plato, and that Scripture regularly contradicted the ancient philosophers.⁸⁹ In 1498, he declared 'let

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, fo. 12^v.

⁸⁶ '[S]iamo inpii et Idio ce ne pagherà . . . [devo] levare queste due case Panciatiche e Cancellieri et ridurgli a uno vivere popolare': Niccolò Valori, BNF, Carteggio Lanfredini, MS II. V. 21, fos. 37–40.

⁸⁷ Savonarola in Villari, *La storia di Girolamo Savonarola e de' suoi tempi*, i, p. cclvi.

⁸⁸ Girolamo Savonarola, *Prediche sopra Aggeo: con il Trattato circa il reggimento e governo della città di Firenze*, ed. Luigi Firpo (Rome, 1965), 59–60: 'voi tenete molti libri in casa, che non li doveresti tenere, perchè v'è scritto di molte cose inoneste. Audili questi tali libri, chè non sono cose di cristiani. Se tu vuoi esser cristiano, ti bisogna esser unto del Spirito santo, non di cose pagane e disoneste'. See also his remarks in Girolamo Savonarola, *Prediche sopra i Salmi*, ed. Vincenzo Romano, 2 vols. (Rome, 1969–74), ii, 24, 36, 64; Girolamo Savonarola, *Prediche sopra l'Esodo*, ed. Pier Giorgio Ricci, 2 vols. (Rome, 1955–6), ii, 329–30, 343–4.

⁸⁹ Girolamo Savonarola, *Prediche sopra Ruth e Michea*, ed. Vincenzo Romano, 2 vols. (Rome, 1962), i, 30–2, 75. 'Quella scienza, ti dico la quale viene per grazia, è quella che vale. Fatti beffe d'ogni altra scienza, fatti beffe di Platone e Aristotile'.

Plato be Plato and Aristotle Aristotle and not Christians, for they are not'. As evidence of the triumph of his reforming message, he pointed to the contrast between the piety of Florentines in 1498 and the state of affairs only a few years earlier, when a paganism devoid of any sense of the proper Christian life prospered.⁹⁰ These are only a few examples among many and represent a recurring theme in Savonarola's sermons after 1494.⁹¹

An interpretation of his motives that combines both intellectual and political arguments is possible: that Ficino and Savonarola were political and religious rivals both before and after 1494. The social turmoil and political vacuum caused by the collapse of Medici power created opportunities for Savonarola to shape the development of Florentine politics and culture. It is possible that Ficino saw developments in similar terms, or at least that the fall of the Medici did not constitute a setback to his Platonic mission. There is evidence suggesting that Ficino was active in Florence between 1494 and 1498; his sense of his own divine appointment and prophetic powers would not have encouraged him to abandon the city and its intellectuals — the source from which a reformed Christian community would arise. The tumultuous political life of the city, while deplorable to Ficino, was precisely the ill that Platonic philosophy alone was capable of curing; indeed, Florentines had already shown themselves singularly responsive to Ficino's political contextualization of Platonic philosophy. Weinstein's characterization of Ficino and Savonarola as rivals may be more true after 1494 than during the late 1480s and early 1490s, which would explain why Savonarola turned on the fundamental intellectual sources of Ficino's programme after 1494.

The two men were certainly patronage rivals. They each relied on the Valori family in crucial ways after 1494. Ficino already had a tradition of friendship and clientage with the Valori, but it became closer and stronger after 1494. By 1495, Savonarola's politics had become inextricably related to Francesco Valori in particular and to Niccolò Valori more generally. Consider the

⁹⁰ Savonarola, *Prediche sopra l'Esodo*, ed. Ricci, i, 51; ii, 291. 'Questa dottrina tu hai veduto che la t'ha provato la fede con tante ragioni e ha introdotto il ben vivere nella tua città. Non è vero questo, popolo che prima qua, in Firenze, non sono molti anni, era un paganesimo senza lume alcuno di ben vivere?' 'Si vuol fare che Platone sia Platone, Aristotile Aristotile, e non che siano cristiani, perche non sono'.

⁹¹ Polizzotto, *Elect Nation*, 96.

intellectual problems Niccolò, and to a lesser extent Ficino, faced after the expulsion of the Medici. At exactly the same time that Savonarola, in his sermons on Amos and Zachary in 1496, attacked Plato and the wise men who failed to guide the ship of state into a safe harbour, Niccolò Valori published Ficino's *Commentaries on Plato*.⁹² In the preface to this work, published when Savonarola was approaching the height of his power, Ficino singled out each member of the family for their specific contributions to his task of reviving Platonic philosophy.⁹³ Niccolò's commitment as a patron of Platonic philosophy remained as strong as it had ever been, as demonstrated by his 1496 publication of Ficino's commentaries, though tested more strongly now because of the unsympathetic political climate for Platonic arguments, created by Savonarola. His personal loyalty to Ficino certainly increased; the priest and philosopher was now in fact a relative of Niccolò, and Ficino, on at least one occasion, acted in his capacity as priest to further the family's fortunes. It is particularly significant that the most influential voice articulating criticism of the Medici and Platonism was that of Savonarola. Niccolò's uncle Francesco was recognized by many Florentines as the political leader of the movement. In the turbulent factional politics of those years, the political fortunes of the relatively small Valori family benefited greatly from the support Francesco received from the Savonarolan party. Savonarola's public critiques of the Medici and of Platonic philosophy must therefore have been a particularly strong source of discomfort for Niccolò. The family was well known as friends of Ficino, second only to the Medici, and as the publishers before and after 1494 of Ficino's translations of Plato. Ficino had frequently written of the affection he bore the Valori and the Medici, and had made parallels between Filippo Valori and Lorenzo, and Francesco and Cosimo.

Savonarola's attacks on Plato must have been inspired by Ficino's activity in the city, his continued insistence on Platonism as the key to Florentine regeneration, his privileged position as the principal interpreter of Plato, and his growing influence on the Valori family, principal political figures in Savonarola's

⁹² See the discussion of this by Marcel, *Marsile Ficin*, 564–7.

⁹³ I have used a manuscript copy of the preface from the BNF, Filze Rinuccini, 27, box 3, 'zibaldone Valori', unfoliated.

following. Savonarola had frequently lamented that his following was ridden with rivalries and that internecine discord had probably alienated prominent citizens initially inclined to support his cause.⁹⁴ The rivalries and potential dissent have generally been identified in political terms, as competition between rival alliances of *piagnoni* families.⁹⁵ Savonarola may also have perceived a genuine intellectual and spiritual rivalry within the heart of his following, since the Valori family were continuing to embrace the Ficinian programme of moral reform and continuing to support Ficino's work in Florence.

This interpretation helps explain why Ficino wrote his savage denunciation of the friar's hypocrisy in 1498,⁹⁶ but does not seem to have expressed any criticism prior to the friar's death. His most important patrons, the Valori, were political leaders of the Savonarolan movement; and a significant source of the family's influence in the city, which was often used in Ficino's favour, therefore stemmed in part from Savonarola's reputation for integrity and commitment to the good fortune of the city. Although Niccolò eventually returned to favour in Florence, with more authority than ever (he said), the fall of the family was total in the months immediately following April 1498. Ficino had first-hand indisputable evidence of the consequences of Savonarolan commitment for Florentines: the public standing of his friends and patrons had been destroyed by their Savonarolan enthusiasm — and, in the case of Francesco Valori, Francesco's wife, and his nephew, they had been quite literally destroyed, murdered by an angry mob who then sacked Francesco's *palazzo*.

IV

The Valori were not passive observers in the tensions caused by their multiple loyalties. Like Ficino and Savonarola prior to 1494, the Valori never accepted that the two reforming visions were mutually incompatible. Quite the opposite: in his *Vita di Lorenzo de' Medici* Niccolò Valori elaborated on the significance

⁹⁴ Savonarola in Villari, *La storia di Girolamo Savonarola e de' suoi tempi*, i, p. cclvi.

⁹⁵ *Piagnoni*, meaning 'crier' or 'whiner', was a derisive term initially used by Savonarola's foes, but which subsequently became a badge of pride for Savonarola's followers.

⁹⁶ *Supplementum Ficinianum*, ed. Kristeller, ii, 77–8.

of the Savonarolan and Platonic affiliations of his family, and on the salutary effects of the family's traditions on the political health of Florence.

Valori's *Vita* was the first biography of Lorenzo the Magnificent. Machiavelli and Guicciardini based their eulogies of Lorenzo upon it and repeated almost verbatim many of Valori's details.⁹⁷ In spite of its own eulogistic qualities, Valori's *Vita* is nevertheless an informative and detailed analysis of Lorenzo's career and it has influenced most modern interpretations of the Medici ruler. Most of the personality traits that scholarship attributes to Lorenzo — his juxtaposition of moodiness, melancholy and playfulness, his commitment to peace in the peninsula, and his intellectual curiosity — were first articulated in substance in Valori's *Vita*. For the discussion here, the most important quality Valori attributed to Lorenzo was his enthusiastic preference for Platonic philosophy. James Hankins concluded that the tradition positing a close connection between Lorenzo and Platonism began in the early sixteenth century, thanks to Corsi's biography of Ficino and Valori's biography of Lorenzo.⁹⁸ Valori certainly did present Lorenzo as particularly fascinated by Platonism, but he never referred to an actual academy nor presented Lorenzo as presiding over Platonic gatherings. It may also be, however, that the work is in fact a late fifteenth-century source, not one from the early sixteenth century.

The context in which Valori composed his *Vita di Lorenzo de' Medici* is an essential point of departure. Valori claimed that the work was written immediately after Lorenzo's death, but that he had shelved it for several years, until his friend, Cardinal Luigi Rossi, encouraged him to publish it sometime after the election of Leo X in 1513.⁹⁹ In 1958, Felix Gilbert argued that it was composed sometime after 1513.¹⁰⁰ Gilbert's principal line of

⁹⁷ See Francesco Guicciardini, in *Scritti politici e ricordi*, ed. Roberto Palmarocchi (Bari, 1933), 223–8; Niccolò Machiavelli, in *Machiavelli: The Chief Works and Others*, ed. Allan Gilbert, 3 vols. (Durham, NC, 1989), iii, 1432–3; Niccolò Valori, *Magnanimi Laurentii Medices viri illustris vita/Vita di Lorenzo de' Medici, resa in volgare dal figlio Filippo Valori*, ed. Enrico Niccolini (Vicenza, 1991): manuscript copy in BNF, 'Palatino', 1101.

⁹⁸ Hankins, 'Myth of the Florentine Platonic Academy', 460.

⁹⁹ According to his declaration in the preface to the edition presented to Leo X: Valori, *Vita di Lorenzo de' Medici*, ed. Niccolini, 36–7.

¹⁰⁰ Felix Gilbert, 'Guicciardini, Machiavelli, Valori on Lorenzo Magnifico', *Renaissance News*, xi (1958).

reasoning followed in this way: in the form of prophecies, the *Vita* alludes to the French invasion of 1494, and therefore could not have been written immediately after Lorenzo's death in 1492, prior to the actual prophesied events; also, between 1494 and 1512, Valori was a committed republican and a confidant of Soderini, and therefore would have had no discernible motive for composing a eulogistic life of an illustrious member of the recently exiled family.¹⁰¹ Therefore, it must have been written after the Medici restoration.

Later studies by Mario Martelli, Enrico Gusberti, Nicolai Rubinstein, Catherine Kovesi and Roslyn Cooper have rejected Gilbert's dating.¹⁰² Pointing to textual inconsistencies, Martelli argued that Filippo Valori's Italian translation was not based on the extant Latin text, but on an earlier version, now lost. He suggested a composition date of sometime before 1494. Cooper and Kovesi have followed Martelli's dating, though Cooper argues persuasively for substantive revisions made after 1513. Rubinstein supported Valori's own account, arguing for a composition date as early as 1492 with revisions probably being made sometime after 1512. Gusberti has also adopted Valori's account, pointing to the pro-Neapolitan and anti-Milanese tone of the *Vita*, consistent with Piero de' Medici's foreign policy.

In 1991, Enrico Niccolini made the most comprehensive comparison of the various editions, manuscript and published (none of which, incidentally, is autograph).¹⁰³ His comparison included editions not seen by either Gilbert or Martelli, upon whom most datings rely. He concluded that Valori's original statement was most probably true, that he composed it — or at least a first draft — after Lorenzo's death. The prophetic elements could easily have been added two years later. Since we lack an

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 113.

¹⁰² Mario Martelli, 'Le due redazioni della *Laurentii Medicei Vita* di Niccolò Valori', *La bibliofilia: rivista di storia del libro e di bibliografia* (1964), 240–1; Enrico Gusberti, *Un mito del Cinquecento: Lorenzo il Magnifico* (Bologna, 1981), 76–8; Nicolai Rubinstein, 'The Formation of the Posthumous Image of Lorenzo de' Medici', in Edward Chaney and Neil Ritchie (eds.), *Oxford, China, and Italy: Writings in Honour of Sir Harold Acton on his 80th Birthday* (London, 1984); Catherine Kovesi, 'Niccolò Valori and the Medici Restoration of 1512: Politics, Eulogies, and the Preservation of a Family Myth', *Rinascimento*, xxvii (1987); Roslyn Pesman Cooper, 'Political Survival in Early Sixteenth-Century Florence: The Case of Niccolò Valori', in Caroline Elam and Peter Denley (eds.), *Florence and Italy: Renaissance Studies in Honor of Nicolai Rubinstein* (Exeter, 1988), 78.

¹⁰³ Valori, *Vita di Lorenzo de' Medici*, ed. Niccolini, 9–30.

autograph copy which might indicate how many drafts he made, we cannot rule out that Valori added elements at various different times, as the occasion befitted. Niccolini explained the centrality of the image of Lorenzo as an ideal Platonic ruler as further evidence of his dating: that the biography was written by a young Niccolò Valori, fresh from the tutelage of Marsilio Ficino and eager to provide a Platonic interpretation of the city's first statesman and fellow patron of Ficino.¹⁰⁴

This reading of Valori's *Vita* suggests some new conclusions regarding the function and purpose of the text. Gilbert concluded that Valori's praise of Lorenzo, much like Machiavelli's and Guicciardini's, was simply a calculated piece of political flattery. Its purpose was to redeem him in the eyes of the Medici after the debacle of the Boscoli–Capponi conspiracy and his consequent imprisonment.¹⁰⁵ Catherine Kovesi argued that the *Vita*, while on one level designed to flatter the Medici, at another level was an attempt to reinforce the Savonarolan traditions of the family, almost in code; it was therefore a more complex and politically interesting document than had been appreciated.¹⁰⁶

This article differs on two points. There is no clear reason to conclude that Niccolò's statements deploring the actions of the Medici after Lorenzo's death imply that he did not have genuine affection and admiration for Lorenzo, especially given their mutual friendship with and support of Ficino. Late in his life, he wrote a letter to Francesco di Iacopo da Empoli that spoke in reverential terms about the memory of Lorenzo the Magnificent.¹⁰⁷ Kovesi also may have identified only one of the two principal functions of the text. Niccolò Valori was as eager to underscore the family's prominence as patrons of Marsilio Ficino and Platonic philosophy, as he was to underscore their Savonarolan convictions. If we accept Niccolini's early dating and concede that at least some passages could have been added later, a new reading is possible: that Niccolò Valori's *Vita di Lorenzo de' Medici* was a defence and legitimation of Platonic studies, probably composed, or at least conceived, in the

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 18–19.

¹⁰⁵ Gilbert, 'Guicciardini, Machiavelli, Valori on Lorenzo Magnifico', 114.

¹⁰⁶ Kovesi, 'Niccolò Valori and the Medici Restoration of 1512', 301–7.

¹⁰⁷ ASF, Mediceo Avanti il Principato (MAP), filza 124, c. 696^r.

1490s, when the Valori were collaborating more closely than ever with Ficino.

Niccolò's biography of Lorenzo becomes in effect a defence of his family's intellectual tradition in particular, and more broadly of the social and political utility of Platonism. First, Niccolò reinforces Ficino's larger attempts to reconcile the study of Platonism with Christianity, in order to show that moral rigour and moral reform were aided by the study of Plato.¹⁰⁸ He has Lorenzo affirm that without Platonism one cannot easily understand Christian doctrine, reiterating Ficino's broader argument that Platonic doctrine is in essence religious philosophy, designed ultimately to further religion and bring men back to the Christian faith.¹⁰⁹ To hammer this point home, Valori related Lorenzo's patronage of the Augustinian Mariano da Genazzano. Impressed by Mariano because of his reputation for 'eloquence and learning', such that he moved 'not only the people, but intellectuals as well', Lorenzo believed it would be 'as useful as it was honourable' to ensure that Mariano stayed in Florence. Valori's explanation of how this happened repeatedly makes parallels between the study of Platonism and the study of theology. Lorenzo builds a monastery a short distance outside Florence. Lorenzo, Giovanni Pico, his close friend, and many other intellectuals would regularly gather there, as if in an 'academy of the Christian religion, to debate and discuss divine mysteries and the secret meanings of theology'. Valori is echoing Ficino's conviction that the correct interpretation of Plato's truths was a secret, that it had been deliberately concealed for protection but would be revealed in fifteenth-century Florence. Mariano used to say that he had never met any man 'so filled with piety and faith and who would speak with such reverence of divine matters and, following the opinion of the Platonics and other Christians, would argue that terrestrial life was but a pale shadow of a future life'. According to Valori, no discussions pleased Lorenzo so much as those that addressed the immortality of the individual soul.

The *Vita* also used Platonism as a defence of the Valori family's close collaboration with Lorenzo, and Lorenzo's cultural project

¹⁰⁸ This paragraph paraphrases pp. 128–30 of Valori, *Vita di Lorenzo de' Medici*, ed. Niccolini.

¹⁰⁹ Kristeller, *Philosophy of Marsilio Ficino*, 25–9.

in general, and so can also be read, in the context of the 1490s, as a politically acceptable explanation of the well-known cultural achievements of the Valori under the Medici. In part this emerges from what Niccolò does *not* say. Hardly any domestic political questions are discussed. The one exception is the Pazzi conspiracy, in which the principal emphasis is on Lorenzo's clemency, and Filippo Valori's loyalty to Lorenzo and encouragement of Lorenzo's attempts to establish public harmony in the aftermath.¹¹⁰ This is certainly not true, but unlike other accounts such as that of Poliziano, Valori neither condemns the conspirators nor praises them. The rest of the political discussions follow what one would expect of humanist history: he recounts the wars in which Florence was involved and emphasizes Lorenzo's encouragement of pacific policies and balance of power.

Early in the biography, Valori has Lorenzo affirm that, along with Christianity, being a good citizen depends on an understanding of Platonic doctrine.¹¹¹ If one studies the *Vita* for examples of Lorenzo's good political citizenship, one finds that it was entirely cultural and that it frequently revolved around Ficino, Platonism and educational utility. The intellectual work undertaken not only by Lorenzo, but by the first citizens of the city, are the principal civic achievements for the republic. Among those singled out for praise are Niccolò's father and brother, Bartolomeo and Filippo, Donato Acciaiuoli and Pierfilippo Pandolfini. Perhaps the most praiseworthy of Lorenzo's activities was his intellectual patronage of the Pisan *studio*, to which he attracted learned scholars without sacrificing the quality and number of those who worked in Florence to educate the Florentine youth. Chief among these erudite scholars was Ficino, more 'skilled than anyone at penetrating Platonic secrets and hidden meanings' and who for Florence was 'the first to show the way of the Academics'. Finally, it is Ficino who becomes the Platonic interpreter of the portents and signs that indicate the fall of the Medici and troubles for Italy. It is thus the principal advocate of Platonism, Marsilio Ficino, who first predicts the demise of the family's fortunes; and importantly, this begins with Piero di Lorenzo de' Medici, whom no one ever defended as an ideal Platonic ruler.

¹¹⁰ Valori, *Vita di Lorenzo de' Medici*, ed. Niccolini, 107–13.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 100. The rest of this paraphrases pp. 100, 102, 127–31, 144.

The sixteenth-century Platonic tradition for the Valori was as vital as it had been during Ficino's lifetime. Niccolò presented the *Vita* to Leo X; his son Filippo presented it to Lucrezia Salviati; and his son, Baccio Valori, presented it to Duke Cosimo I in the early 1560s. Between then and 1600, Baccio Valori became the hub of Platonic literary activity. He sponsored a biography of Francesco Valori by the Dominican Silvano Razzi, which elaborated on the special relationship between Ficino and the family.¹¹² Benedetto Varchi wrote a biography of Ficino's pupil, Francesco da Diacceto, dedicated to Baccio.¹¹³ Baccio encouraged Francesco Patrizi to write a biography of Ficino, who declined. Patrizi, however, along with Luca Pinelli, Benedetto Varchi and Francesco de' Vieri, wrote several commentaries on Platonic philosophy, addressed to Baccio. An anonymous biography of Ficino from the late sixteenth century was dedicated to Baccio, who may have furnished the author with source material.¹¹⁴ The author of the biography lamented that no one had yet written a proper biography of Ficino, though Francesco Patrizi and Benedetto Varchi had at least stated their intentions of doing so.¹¹⁵ Patrizi in fact had not declared his intention of doing so; however, it is true that Baccio Valori had asked Patrizi to undertake the biography. Patrizi eventually declined, though only after expounding to Baccio his enthusiasm for Ficino and acknowledging that a biography was indeed needed. The correspondence between Baccio and Patrizi is preserved in the Valori family papers.¹¹⁶ The biography goes on to discuss and praise every aspect of the Valori family's relationship with Ficino: their role as Ficino's protectors, Filippo's correspondence with Ficino, Filippo's journey to Hungary to promote Ficino's Platonic labours abroad, Bartolomeo's and Francesco's Platonic studies, and

¹¹² Silvano Razzi, *Vite di cinque huomini illustri* (Florence, 1602).

¹¹³ Benedetto Varchi, BNF, Manoscritti, 30, pt 14.

¹¹⁴ 'Vita Ficini', in BNF, Palatinus, 488; pubd in Marcel, *Marsile Ficini*, appendix I. On the authorship of the biography, see *ibid.*, appendix II; Eugenio Garin, 'La vita di Marsilio Ficino', *Rinascimento*, i (1951), 94–5; *Supplementum Ficinianum*, ed. Kristeller, i, 177.

¹¹⁵ 'E ben vero che M. Francesco Patritio, gran' Platonico de nostri tempi o prima Benedetto Varchi diedero intentione di far' questa fatica a molti amici e fra gl' altri al clarissimo Sig. Baccio Valori, che cio desiderava non poco, ma non fu poi, che si sappia, o impediti dalla morte o da altro, messa ad esecuzione altrimenti': Marcel, *Marsile Ficini*, 696.

¹¹⁶ BNF, Filze Rinuccini, 27, box 3, unfoliated pages.

Niccolò's support and protection after 1494.¹¹⁷ The biography concludes by marvelling that Ficino enjoyed friendships not just with the greatest citizens of Florence but with all the cities of Italy: first among them were three generations of the Medici family and three generations of the Valori family, but also including King Matthias of Hungary, Cardinal Girolamo Riario, Leo X (Giovanni de' Medici), Federigo d'Urbino, Bernardo Bembo and Ermolao Barbaro.¹¹⁸ Several biographical contributions to the family's *zibaldone* (drafts for a history of Florence and of the family's role in Florentine history) structure their cultural contribution entirely around the revival of Platonism, the family's friendship with Ficino, and the posthumous loyalty they continued to show him through Platonic studies. Patronage of Platonism was the most enduring and prominent element in Valori family mythology.

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To conclude: this article has attempted to demonstrate the complex interactions between a notable moment in Renaissance intellectual history and its political environment, in particular the competitive patronage systems that grew out of the republican restoration. The collapse of Medici power made the issue of the proper reform of Florence immediate and urgent, though of course people like Ficino, Savonarola and the Valori all imagined the form that the reformation should take in different ways. For Ficino and Savonarola, however, the unstable political context of the fledgling republic made the support of powerful republican families more essential than ever. Each reformer began to rely increasingly heavily on the support of the Valori family for their plans. Although the two men had initially been mutually sympathetic, their relations soured as they began to see themselves as competitors for their principal political allies. As Ficino became closer to the Valori family between 1494 and 1496, and as the Valori demonstrated their support of him by continuing to publish his works, Savonarola accelerated his public campaign to discredit Plato and Platonic philosophers. Considering that relatively few Platonic scholars were

¹¹⁷ Marcel, *Marsile Ficin*, 703, 706, 709–10, 719.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 714.

prominent in Florence during these years, Savonarola must have been directing his thunderous sermons towards his own party, to the Valori, Ficino and those in their circle. Ironically for Savonarola, his criticism did more to strengthen than undermine the loyalty of the Valori family towards Ficino. Throughout the sixteenth century, the Valori continued to praise the memory of Ficino and their friendship with him, and they remained the hub of Platonic activity in Florence.

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